



# IN SEARCH OF WORK

Finding a job during an industry downturn

BY RYAN RAY

It was June 2008, and we were having our most profitable year in company history. On our way to a project site, my client looked at me and said, “Our management tells us it will be like this for another 10 years.” My mind started to race. Ten more years! I envisioned buying a boat, building that dream house and retiring on the beach. Unfortunately, those dreams died just a few short months later. The project was vastly reduced in size and scope, and profits fell as we were forced to lower our rates. Ultimately, we had to reduce our staff. This was my first industry downturn.

In my opinion, there is nothing worse than laying people off. For our company, it is a very agonizing process in which we try to exhaust all other options first. It is certainly not something any of us take lightly. We recognize that, when the industry is hot, employees are hard to come by. During a downturn, employees are plentiful, but the jobs are few.

However, with a proper mindset and the right tools, finding a new job is possible. But it requires a certain understanding

about what you offer, equipping yourself with some new skills, thinking differently and outpacing the competition. We hope that this article will give you some ideas to help you differentiate yourself and put you in a position to succeed.

## OVERCOMING EMOTIONS

After a layoff, your new full-time job is to secure one that pays. This job, the one that doesn't pay, will be the hardest one you will ever have. Why? Because the more time passes, the more stressful it becomes. Doubt begins to creep in, and this is followed by a sense of dread. Each morning, there is the fear of failing.

For those who haven't been through a layoff before, know that going through a wide range of emotions during this time is normal. Just do not dwell on them. I talked to a guy who had terminal cancer and asked him how he stayed so positive. He told me he would spend one hour every day allowing himself to soak in what was happening. Then he'd go back to focusing on being positive and beating his cancer. That really stuck with me.

## DIFFERENTIATE YOURSELF

Nearly every job candidate has the same talking points. All claim to be hard workers, self-starters and work well with others. During a downturn, you may find yourself in a group of 20, 30 or even 100 others making the same claims. When the market is full of qualified and skilled candidates, you will need some creative maneuvers to differentiate yourself. After all, you are trying to sell a product—*yourself*. And with any product, the more bells and whistles it has, the more attractive it becomes. So how can you set yourself apart? Here are five ideas:

### 1 Beef Up Your Skills

Start by focusing on the attributes you have—your talents, knowledge and work ethic. These are what will get you hired. Regardless of age or experience, we can all benefit from learning something new. This is an ideal time to take a course or add a new skill to your toolbox. Is there some training available that will help you enhance the skills and talents you already possess? Think about what you can do to make yourself more marketable.

There are many resources available, and some training programs are free. For example, Massive Open Online Courses ([www.mooc-list.com](http://www.mooc-list.com)) aggregates all the free online courses in one place. Another is LinkedIn ([www.linkedin.com/learning](http://www.linkedin.com/learning)). And of course, IRWA ([www.irwaonline.org](http://www.irwaonline.org)) offers a full range of industry-specific courses that are affordably priced, many of which are available online.

### 2 Contact Past Service Providers

While the company you came from might be suffering from an industry downturn, other contractors you have worked with on past projects might not be. Most of us have skills that are transferable. For example, the survey company from your last project might need some help with route development. Your previous title company might need some abstracting, or the engineering firm might need some

help with permitting. Think about where there are overlapping services. Start with your network, and consider working in a related industry—one that could benefit from your specific skill set.

### 3 Offer to Work for Commission

Today's service companies are always on the lookout for their next project. So if they are not currently hiring because they don't have any open positions, ask if they will let you create one. Explain that you are willing to go out and find some new business on your own nickel—with an agreement that specifies commission and/or a defined project role if they attain the business. All you need is a phone and internet access. Not everyone will take you up on this, but someone will.

### 4 Become an Intern

If all else fails, offer to work as an unpaid intern. There is little risk for them and great upside for you. After all, it gives you an opportunity to show them what you're capable of doing. Today's college graduates are willing to do this, and many of them get hired because they not only got in the door, but they were able to demonstrate their capabilities.

Even if you don't get hired, you will likely gain some new experience. More importantly, you can leverage your unpaid internship in your interviews, proving that you're a hard worker even when not being compensated. You will also have a new reference, one that can vouch for your strong work ethic. I suggest offering to work 20 hours a week, as this allows you to spend the remaining 20 hours on finding a paid position.

### 5 Outpace the Competition

In a downturn, you need to do far more than anyone else to secure a job. If you hear about folks sending out five resumes, then you need to send out 50. If someone says they are spending a few hours a week taking training courses, then you

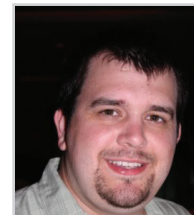
need to be spending 20. Of course, you are probably thinking, "When will I have time for all of this?" To that we strongly suggest that you make time for it. To help you stay focused, try setting some specific goals that you can measure. Some examples include:

- Cold call 20 new companies every day
- Call 20 people in your network every day
- Read seven industry related articles daily
- Send out five resumes daily

## THE PAYOFF

The reality is, it's harder to land a new job when you don't have one. This is especially true during a downturn. There is another job out there, but it may take some time to find it. While you may be tempted to binge out on Netflix, this is the time to put in 40 hours a week or more selling this product called YOU. Stay focused. Just when you think you have done all you can, do more. Finally, be creative. Look at what everyone else is doing—then do something to set yourself apart.

Even when the economy is rough, following a basic framework can help increase your chances of landing that next paying job. We hope this has been helpful for those facing the current downturn and look forward to better economic times ahead. ☘



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